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Review of *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-1960. Minding Their Own Business* by Nicole Robertson

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Review of *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-1960. Minding Their Own Business* by Nicole Robertson

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REFERENCES

Nicole Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-1960. Minding Their Own Business*. (Studies in Labour History), Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2016 [First published by Ashgate Publishing, 2010], 268 p., £41.99

- 1 In recent years there has been a quite remarkable upsurge of interest in co-operative principles, fueled by the last economic crisis and the simultaneous rise of the social and solidarity¹ economy especially in the richest countries. Growing interest in these alternative stances on wealth production, social accountability and power-sharing has been brought about mainly by grass-roots initiatives but also acknowledged by public figures across the political spectrum². Little attention had been paid to co-operatives from the second half of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century, despite their long-lasting influence – with the noteworthy exception of worker co-operatives in the late 1970s.
- 2 This is particularly true in Great Britain, where historians have extensively researched into and written about the labour movement, neglecting the somewhat less militant and tumultuous history of the co-ops. Nicole Robertson is senior lecturer in History at Sheffield Hallam University. In this book, she aims at reassessing the manifold impacts of the co-operative movement on various British local communities from 1914 to 1960. By covering half a century and the two major world conflicts, Robertson offers her

readership a complete account of what co-operatives accomplished for the commercial, industrial, social, educational as well as cultural development of the country.

- 3 In doing this, she follows in Arnold Bonner's footsteps and adds a local dimension to his major national study in this field³. The author uses many first-hand historical resources such as newspaper archives, meeting minutes, official statements of policy, advertising banners and business reports. She focuses on eight case studies of different origins, sizes and purposes, scattered over England, Scotland and Wales⁴. All of them are consumer coops: historically, the British co-operative movement has always been dominated by retail or consumer societies and this is why they are given such a leading role in the book. During the 1990s and the 2000s, influential works were produced by Gurney to show how this broad movement shaped consumption habits and challenged the hegemony of capitalist values⁵.
- 4 The book is divided into eight chapters, each examining one aspect of the movement in its contemporary organisational structure. The first chapter consists in a general overview of the development of the British co-operative movement at the time. Many figures – concerning membership, sales and much more – are given through the description of the eight consumer co-operative societies selected for the study. Some of these consumer co-operatives reached considerable sizes – hundreds of thousands of members in Birmingham or London – because "[c]o-operators offered a very different vision, one that shifted the focus beyond male workers, wages and unionism, and broadened out to incorporate the "woman with the basket", prices and consumerism." (p. 4).
- 5 Robertson then goes on to the main topic of her work and explains how dependent a community could be on a local co-operative society and how tightly-linked they could be. In some co-operative strongholds, societies were able to cater for the whole population and all needs – food, clothing, and mortgages for shelter – were supplied "from cradle to grave." Attempts were even made to build international communities based on lectures in foreign languages and exchange programmes between co-ops of different countries.
- 6 Communities were built and bound together by means of a shared ideology and sense of belonging. These are the objects of chapters three and four. A common *raison d'être* was found in opposition to unregulated capitalism, especially during the industrial downturns of the inter-war years. In the newspaper *Co-operative News*, the movement was personified as St George spearing a dragon identified as « the capitalist menace. » (p. 46-47)



"The New St George", *Co-operative News*, 14 December 1918

- 7 As the fear of a new global conflict grew, emphasis was placed on the international(ist) and pacifistic principles of co-ops. Despite all events organised locally – from sport contests to shopping weeks – aiming to develop social identification with the cooperative milieu, surveys carried out in the late 30s and early 40s proved that cooperative principles were widely ignored and attendance of quarterly meetings by rank-and-file members was extremely low – Robertson points out that the average attendance rate for London ranged from 0.03 to 0.22% between 1941 and 1947 (p. 59). The leaderships often concluded that this situation might be remedied by more concentration on educating society members.
- 8 The fifth chapter analyses, then, educational measures taken by the nationwide movement to promote co-operative ideals. The creation of education committees was encouraged through prescriptions to invest a minimal proportion of sales surpluses in educational programmes. This was one of the major failures in the local, practical application of policies designed centrally: when times were tight many societies simply spent the education budget on other priorities such as customers' dividends, in particular in Wales (p. 108). During the 1930s and along with the rise of the Welfare State, co-operative societies finally joined the campaign for the extension of the State-funded education system: "[...] the Co-operative Union advocated for free education in all forms of primary and secondary schools, and a maintenance allowance to be paid to enable children to stay at school from the age of 14 to 16 or 18." (p. 125)
- 9 Political action and representation of the co-operative leaders in the House of Parliament are tackled in chapters six and seven. The first political struggle led by co-ops was in favour of consumer rights. For example, they called for laws and rules to improve the quality of agricultural products, especially milk. The Co-operative Party was founded in 1917 to defend the interests of the movement in the House of Commons – first to protest

against wartime quotas and taxation. After the 1918 general election Alfred Waterson became the first co-operative MP for the Kettering seat – one the oldest co-operative strongholds⁶. Not all societies were engaged in political action and the domination of the Labour Party in co-operative strongholds often led to an overlapping political representation. At grass-roots level, the Co-operative and the Labour Parties often worked successfully together though. After the Second World War, the Cooperative Party repeatedly fought for better housing conditions for working classes.

- 10 The final chapter of the book draws a portrait of the British co-operative societies as employers of labour and their relationships with the broader Labour movement. The vast majority of the workers in the co-operative movement were employed in retail societies and a tiny proportion of them in productive activities – by the mid-50s less than 5,000 workers were "self-employed" in true worker co-operatives registered in the Co-operative Productive Federation out of 360,000 co-operative employees (p. 183). As an employer of waged labour, the co-operative movement was often ahead of other industrialists: holidays with pay and the 48-hour week were both granted in the early twentieth century. During the 1930s, advertising campaigns stated that, as a cooperator, "You are sure that all L.C.S. [Leicester Co-operative Society] tailoring is done by workpeople earning good wages and working under decent conditions of employment." (p. 188-189) When such advances became widespread in the 1950s, new claims and complaints aroused, primarily concerning conflicting interests of employees and consumers of the co-operative societies – in many societies, the former were initially forbidden from having full voting powers for the management committee. As for relationships between the co-operative movement and trade unions, they were generally friendly and constructive: many societies helped strikers during the 1926 general strike and trade union membership was compulsory in most of them.
- 11 The thorough archival research work completed for this detailed study makes it a most valuable tool to explore and understand the dense connections between old cooperative societies and the communities in which they were born. This was especially true at a time when the range of needs catered for by the State was for more restricted than today. The two main inputs of this work are the exposure of the links between the activity of local co-operatives and the social and cultural interests of the working and lower middle classes and the delicate day-to-day application – when possible – of co-operative policies in the field on various scales. Given the small number of up-to-date studies of the cooperative history, this volume is a much needed reappraisal. Important milestones of history are discussed in a new light and the exceptional development of the British movement as well as its domination in the International Co-operative Alliance⁷ are documented.
- 12 One of the few existing worker co-operatives in that period might also have been chosen among the case studies to help us grasp not only the reasons for their tiny development but also their own role in the setting up of local communities, in the "cooperative heartland" of the Midlands, for instance, but this is a minor criticism of a fine piece of work.
- 13 **François Deblangy est doctorant à l'Université de Rouen-Normandie et travaille sous la direction de John Mullen.**

NOTES

1. According to the International Labour Organization, « *The SSE refers to enterprises and organizations (cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises) which produce goods, services and knowledge that meet the needs of the community they serve, through the pursuit of specific social and environmental objectives and the fostering of solidarity.* », ilo.org, "Social and Solidarity Economy"
 2. For the United Kingdom, see « Cameron launches 'co-op movement' », BBC News, 8 November 2007 and « Jeremy Corbin – 'We support co-operative principles – they are Labour principles' », The Co-operative Party, 14 October 2017
 3. Arnold Bonner, *British Co-Operation. The History, Principles, and Organisation of the British Co-operative Movement*, Manchester, Co-operative Union Ltd., 1961
 4. Other studies of local co-operative societies mainly concerned the industrial North: see Julie Des Forges, « Cooperation and the working class in Liverpool and the Rhondda », *North West Labour History*, Vol. 19, 1994/5; Jayne Southern, « Co-operation in the North West of England, 1919-1939: Stronghold or Stagnation? », *North West Labour History*, Vol. 19, 1994/5
 5. Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England*, Manchester, Co-operative Union Ltd., 1996; Peter Gurney, « The Battle of the Consumer in Postwar Britain », *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 77, December 2005, pp. 956-987
 6. The presentation of joint candidates with the Labour Party often limited the number of co-operative MPs elected but a first co-operative high tide was reached in 1945 with the election of 23 members.
 7. The International Co-operative Alliance was created in 1895 during the first International Co-operative Congress to represent and serve the interest of co-operatives worldwide. According the first article of its constitution, « *The International Co-operative Alliance, in continuance of the work of the Rochdale Pioneers and in accordance with their principles, seeks, in complete independence and by its own methods, to substitute for the profit-making regime a co-operative system organised in the interests of the whole community and based upon mutual selfhelp.* »
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